

Parent engagement in children's education



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What is parent engagement?

Families are the first educators of their children and they continue to influence their children's learning and development during the school years and long afterwards (Family-School Partnerships Framework).

Parents engage in their children's education in many ways in the home, the community and in schools. Good parenting in the home includes many different kinds of engagement including:

- providing a secure environment
- providing intellectual stimulation and conversation
- modelling constructive social and educational values
- shaping the child's self concept as a learner by fostering literacy and problem solving
- encouraging high aspirations, both personally and socially.

In addition, parents may be engaged in their children's education in school contexts in a range of different ways – both formally and informally.

Engagement is more than involvement

Some writers use the term *family engagement* while others speak of *parent engagement*. We use the term *parent* inclusively here to encompass caregivers and other family members. Regardless of which term is used, it is important to recognise that *engagement* is at the more active end of a participation continuum than is *involvement* and may be qualitatively different. Pushor and Ruitenberg (2005, p. 12-13) suggest the essential difference is that *engagement* implies:

...enabling parents to take their place alongside educators in the schooling of their children, fitting together their knowledge of children, teaching and learning, with teachers' knowledge. With parent engagement, possibilities are created for the structure of schooling to be flattened, power and authority to be shared by educators and parents, and the agenda being served to be mutually determined and mutually beneficial.

Harris and Goodall (2007) conclude that many schools focus on *involving* parents in various school-based or school-related activities, but emphasise that this constitutes parental *involvement* rather than parental *engagement*. Nonetheless, much of the research literature uses the two terms interchangeably.

Most recently, an American National Policy forum defined family engagement as follows:

*Family engagement is a **shared responsibility** of families, schools, and communities for student learning and achievement; it is **continuous** from birth to young adulthood; and it **occurs across multiple settings** where children learn (Weiss, Lopez & Rosenberg, 2010, p.3).*



Parent/family engagement is not in itself a new idea. What is relatively new is the idea that it be formally enshrined in government policy and integrated systemically into school policies and practices. Weiss, Lopez and Rosenberg (2010) assert that family engagement must be a **systemic, integrated and sustained** approach, not an add-on or a random act.

Systemic here means family engagement that is purposefully designed as a core component of educational goals such as school readiness or student achievement.

Integrated engagement will be embedded into structures and processes including training and professional development, teaching and learning, community collaboration, and the use of data for continuous improvement and accountability.

Sustainable engagement will have adequate resources including public–private partnerships, to ensure effective strategies with the power to impact on student learning and achievement.

Defined in this way, and with a community engagement wrap around, family engagement represents 'an innovative strategy in education reform' and 'an effective strategy to promote student success' (Weiss, Lopez & Rosenberg, 2010, p.3).

Why is parent engagement important?

When parents are involved in their children's education at home, they do better in school. And when parents are involved in school, children go farther in school and the schools they go to are better (Henderson & Berla, 1994, p.15).

The *Family-School Partnerships Framework* (2008)¹ emphasises that schools need to recognise the primary role of the family in education and advocates for families and schools to work together in partnership.

The *Framework* argues that effective schools have high levels of parental and community involvement which can be related to improved student learning, attendance and behaviour, regardless of the social or cultural background of the family. Family engagement is therefore seen as part of the core business of schools.

The *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* also acknowledges the benefits of family, school and community partnerships, and expresses a commitment on the part of Australian governments to:

...(work) with all school sectors to ensure that schools engage young Australians, parents, carers, families, other education and training providers, business and the broader community to support students' progress through schooling, and to provide them with rich learning, personal development and citizenship opportunities (p.10).

¹ The Framework was the result of a collaborative national project established by APC, ACSSO and DEEWR (then DEST) in 2004. Trialled in 61 schools in 2005, the Framework was subsequently signed off by MCEETYA in 2008.



A significant body of both international and Australian research has found correlations between parent/family engagement in children's education and schooling, and indicators such as:

- improved school readiness
- higher retention and graduation rates
- enhanced cognitive development and academic achievement
- higher motivation and greater ability to self-regulate behaviour
- better social and relationship skills.

The emergent shift to more 'student-centred' learning also supports the importance of family engagement. When students are encouraged to set personalised learning goals and plans, and when their learning outside the classroom is acknowledged, it follows that the multiple influences on their learning will also be acknowledged and mobilised, including the key role of parents and families (Weiss, Lopez & Stark, 2011).

We also know that schools have much to gain from incorporating family and community perspectives into their curricula and pedagogy, and leveraging their resources. It has been suggested, in fact, that schools can't work well if their relationships with families and communities don't work well (Weiss, Lopez & Rosenberg, 2010).

In our continually changing society the opportunity for schools to contribute to the wellbeing of children and families, and to build the social capital of communities, is being increasingly recognised. In low socioeconomic and rural and remote areas especially, teachers and principals are looked to for community leadership, and schools have become critically important places for the building of civic infrastructure and community capability (Muller, 2009).

Muller's literature review suggests that this depends on schools developing authentic partnerships with families and communities, with a particular challenge being to facilitate the involvement of marginalised or lower socio-economic families to produce reciprocal benefits.

Overall, when schools take steps to motivate parental involvement, they support parents' effectiveness in helping their children learn. Similarly, when school systems attempt to promote teacher and principal contributions to effective parental involvement, they support schools' effectiveness in educating children.

The public mandate for the effective education of all citizens would seem to require nothing less than strong school and community efforts to enable the many contributions that parents can make to their children's educational success (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, Green, Wilkins & Closson, 2005, p.124).



Why do parents get involved?

One of the most important findings is that parents' decisions about involvement are influenced by schools.

A number of studies indicate that most parents want to be more involved in their children's education. However, a major American study (Hoover-Dempsey et al. 2005) found that decisions about becoming involved are influenced by a number of factors including parents':

- role construction (sense of personal or shared responsibility for the child's educational outcomes and beliefs about being involved in child's learning)
- sense of efficacy for helping the child succeed in school (belief that personal actions will help the child learn)
- perception of invitations to involvement (general and specific invitations from school, teacher, and student)
- life-context variables (skills and knowledge, time and energy) and the school's responsiveness to these.

The authors suggest that there are a number of active steps that schools can take to enhance parents' active role construction and sense of efficacy for helping children learn. A range of invitations to involvement can be issued and involvement requests and suggestions can be adapted to the circumstances of parents' life contexts. In these ways school actions may enhance parents' motivation to get involved.

Conversely, school inaction or negative action may diminish motivation for many parents.

What does parent engagement look like in practice?

Family/parent engagement is evident in attitudes, behaviours, policies, programs, and strategies.

Joyce Epstein writes that parents participate in their children's education along numerous dimensions and that overlapping spheres of home, school and community influences shape children's learning and development. She proposes six types of partnership involving different levels of parent involvement, with related school strategies to facilitate these.

Type of partnership	What it involves	Strategy
<i>Basic obligations of families</i>	Providing children with basic needs such as health and safety.	Help all families establish home environments to support children as students.
<i>Basic obligations of schools</i>	Communication between school and family such as notes, phone calls, report cards and parent teacher meetings.	Design effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programs and children's progress.



Type of partnership	What it involves	Strategy
<i>Involvement at school</i>	Volunteering at the school to assist teachers in the classroom or attending school events.	Recruit and organize parent help and support.
<i>Involvement in learning activities at home</i>	Helping children with homework, reading, transition and career decisions.	Provide information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning.
<i>Involvement in decision making, governance, and advocacy</i>	Serving in a parent-teacher association or committee, or being involved in other leadership positions.	Include parents in school decisions, developing parent leaders and representatives.
<i>Collaboration and exchanges with community organisations</i>	Making connections with organisations that share responsibility for children's education, such as after-school programs, health services and other resources.	Identify and integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development.

Adapted from Epstein, 2001

Epstein and Sheldon (2006) argue that effective programs of school, family and community partnerships will include a focus on increasing student learning and development that is explicitly linked to school goals for student success.

They suggest that educators must 'think new' about the communications, connections and coordinated actions they need to facilitate and achieve with families and community partners to help students succeed to their full potential.

Over the past 25 years or so, a range of initiatives and programs have been implemented to:

- develop family, school and community partnerships
- raise parent awareness about the benefits of becoming engaged in their children's education
- provide parents with the relevant skills to become engaged in particular activities
- strengthen families' capacity to deal with the everyday demands of raising children.

However, much of the focus has been on the primary years, and there has been little research and few programs about engagement in the middle and senior years.



How do parents differ in their involvement with schools?

We speak of families as though we all know what families are (R.D. Laing)

While decades of research point to the benefits of parent involvement in education, studies also show that white, middle-class parents are disproportionately involved.

Differences between parents in their level of involvement are associated with social class, poverty, health, and also with parental perception of their role and their levels of confidence in fulfilling it. Some parents are put off by feeling put down by schools and teachers (Desforges, 2003, p.5).

Susan Auerbach's research is noteworthy in this area, highlighting that parent involvement is socially constructed through the lenses of race, class, culture and gender. She found that American minority and poor parents do in fact have high aspirations for their children, but their involvement may not be as evident or as valued as that of white middle class parents. Mindful of Auerbach's insightful profiling of the experiences of urban minority parents, Smith and Wohlstetter comment in a paper about parental involvement in urban Charter schools in the United States:

Educators may be unaware or unappreciative of the invisible strategies that minority or low income parents use to support their children's education, such as making sacrifices so children can attend better schools or limiting children's chores to allow for study time (2009, p. 3).

In looking at the engagement of minority parents Auerbach identified a continuum ranging from 'Moral Supporters' to 'Ambivalent Companions' to 'Struggling Advocates'. Moral supporters encouraged their children to do well but tended not to visit schools or openly advocate for their children. On the other hand, struggling advocates worked hard to fulfil traditional expectations, often visited schools and spoke to staff, but felt they were not valued or taken seriously. In the middle were ambivalent companions – parents who wanted their children to do well, but did not make efforts to advocate on their behalf, and had a tendency to be sceptical or ambivalent about schooling.

Research in the Netherlands also identifies a number of differences between 'white' and minority parents, and those with lower and higher levels of education. For example, parents in 'white' schools were more likely to support teachers during activities. Non-minority parents and certainly those from higher social milieus were also accustomed to having a say in school matters while, in contrast, schools with many disadvantaged pupils paid little or no attention to encouraging parents to have a say and parents in these contexts felt ill-equipped or unqualified to do so (Smit, Driessen, Sluiter & Slegers, 2007).

In the Australian context similar observations have been made about Indigenous parents' involvement in schools. For example, Sims, O'Connor and Forrest (2003, p. 87) point out that a number of conflicting perceptions and expectations may be present among Aboriginal families as they attempt to establish a relationship with their children's school.



A desire for their children's success 'may be tempered by apprehension generated from a history of oppression and parents' own negative schooling experiences'.

Both Desforges (2003) and Smit et al. (2007) argue that the achievement of working class students could be significantly enhanced by applying all that is known about parental involvement to develop a range of different engagement strategies. Recognition of power imbalances between school staff and many parents would be a good starting point. It seems clear that schools need to examine their own values, heighten their cultural awareness and work to develop environments in which all parents feel comfortable.

What facilitates parent engagement?

It all starts with the school.

*Interventions that **focus on the whole family** and involve children learning and working with their parents and carers are some of the most effective in supporting sustained improvements for children and preventing regression. Additionally, interventions which encourage the participation of children and families in the development and delivery of services tend to be more effective (Kendall et al. 2008, p.39).*

Australian and international researchers have identified a range of strategies that can foster parent engagement and partnerships. While many of these involve changing family attitudes and practices, most involve a pro-active approach by schools. While parents are generally interested they may be diffident about expressing this interest. School strategies (Williams, Williams & Ullman, 2002; Epstein, 2001; Muller, 2009) include:

- Giving parents a voice
- Encouraging families to learn together
- Ensuring that parental involvement is fully integrated into schools' development plans
- A pro-active approach involving an action team of teachers and members of the community
- School-initiated approaches rather than school-centric approaches
- Schools reaching out to parents and the community – initiatives coming from the school
- Interventions that focus on the whole family.

Smit et al. (2007, p. 50) suggest that strategies must be oriented towards the following core points:

- development of a vision of parental participation
- expansion of the visibility and approachability of the school team via the creation of contact moments
- attention to the concerns of parents
- connection to what parents find interesting and have an affinity with
- an eye for the quality of the communication between school and parents
- stimulation of creativity and initiative, and
- giving parents time to learn something from the school team.



Anne Henderson (1994) suggested some time ago that the form of parent involvement does not seem to be as important as that it is reasonably well planned, comprehensive and lasting - a point that aligns closely with Weiss et al.'s emphasis on systemic, integrated and sustained approaches as discussed earlier.

What challenges parent engagement?

Factors that inhibit or challenge parent engagement (Smith & Wohlstetter, 2009; Muller, 2009; Smit et al. 2007) can include:

- Work commitments, demands of other children, childcare difficulties and lack of time generally
- Parents perceiving themselves as unqualified to participate – a sense of disenfranchisement
- Language barriers
- A lack of common understanding between school staff and parents about what constitutes parent involvement, leading teachers to blame families and parents to feel unappreciated
- Teachers not wanting parent-initiated contact, and only welcoming contact when they initiate it
- Stereotypical attitudes in which 'minority' parents are viewed as a homogenous group in need of a 'one size fits all' approach
- Inadequate information to parents about the objectives and procedures of the school.

Many parents may feel intimidated by schools and may need to be actively encouraged to become engaged. They may have had negative school experiences themselves and may feel unwelcome or uncomfortable in an 'alien' school environment. They may feel that they have no contribution to make, or that they will be perceived as overstepping their role.

Children may not see their parents and teachers as sharing a common agenda or set of concerns. All of these issues can create misunderstandings and tensions. It is important therefore, that programs and partnerships address these possible barriers to parental engagement by clarifying potential roles to ensure equitable and shared understandings.

One Australian study concluded that 'most Aboriginal parents view teachers as hostile and schools as threatening environments' and, as such, 'many Indigenous people passively resist the education system, by apparent silent tolerance of the status quo, while in fact steadfastly and impassively refusing to be a part of it' (Bond, 2004).

What are the implications for schools and policy makers?

Harris and Goodall's (2007) extensive UK research on parent engagement generated the following implications:



For schools

- Parental engagement must be a priority....It must be embedded in teaching and learning policies, and school improvement policies, so that parents are seen as an integral part of the student learning process.
- Schools must be clear about the aims of all communication with parents. What response, if any, is required from parents, and how will that impact on the school and the learning of the child?
- Schools should endeavour to support the engagement of parents who are already involved in the learning of their children as well as reaching those parents who are less engaged.
- Schools should consider training for staff (teachers and others) who work most closely with parents.
- Schools need to be flexible in dealing with parents, in terms of times of meetings and locations.
- Schools should consider the uses of new technologies for communicating with parents and be clear about what they aim to achieve with these.

For policy makers

- Offer clear guidance about parental engagement (rather than involvement) in schools.
- Provide direction to schools about the relationship between forms and purposes for parent engagement.
- Create policies that clarify the range of ways in which parents can be productively engaged in schools.
- Ensure that the purposes for parental engagement are explicit in relevant policies.

How important is further research about parent engagement?

Our intuitions and the research tell us how important parent involvement/ engagement is for the educational achievement of children.

While we know a reasonable amount about the positive effect of 'spontaneous' parental engagement, we know little about the effectiveness of specific interventions designed to facilitate engagement.

Evaluations of these interventions are still under-researched and inconclusive. More contextually specific Australian research is also clearly needed.

How important is data collection?

We know that parents often don't know how to support student learning in practical ways. Parents need information about key indicators such as attendance, growth in learning, achievement, school ethos and environment, retention and graduation rates, and other important issues that affect educational success.



Data collection needs to involve parents because data can serve as a catalyst for home-school communication and support parents to engage more confidently and fully in their children's learning, a point that Weiss, Lopez and Rosenberg (2010, p. 16) make well:

Sharing student learning and performance data with families changes the conversation between families and schools. Data provide the content that engages families to understand where students are, where they need to go and the options for getting their goals. When data use involves parents in this way, it becomes meaningful; it gives parents a voice in the educational process and empowers them to partner with educators to promote their child's academic growth.

Where to from here?

There is still much we need to know and much to talk about, especially here in Australia. The Australian Parents Council (APC) and Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) are not alone in the view that Australia - once a leader - has now seriously slipped behind in its contributions to exploring, explaining and leveraging parent/ family engagement and partnerships for the very real and significant benefit of students, schools and communities.

The following questions are included to stimulate dialogue and shape a research agenda for the future:

1. How might we define family/ parent engagement in the Australian context? Would this help?
2. How is parent/ family engagement seen and understood by parents and students? How do these perceptions impact on practice?
3. How does parent engagement create a context for learning that influences students' attitudes about self and learning and their learning behaviours and outcomes?
4. How can parent engagement be extended, enhanced and facilitated? How can parents become true partners and not just bystanders?
5. What is the impact of cultural differences on family engagement? What different interpretations of family and views on raising children are there in our schools? Is there evidence of alienation or scepticism about school structures and protocols?
6. How much resistance to parent engagement is there and what are the sources of this? How can schools implement professional development to change resistant teacher attitudes? How can resistant parent attitudes be changed?
7. What is the role of leadership in addressing barriers to parent engagement?
8. Do definitions of what constitutes family/parent engagement adequately take into account what marginalised parents and families do for their children?
9. What is the impact of cultural differences on family engagement? What different interpretations of family and views on raising children are there in our schools? Is there evidence of alienation or scepticism about school structures and protocols?
10. What tools can be developed to involve parents in instructional practices and help parents understand content areas?
11. How can parent/family engagement be more than random acts? How can it be systemic, integrated and sustained?



12. Does enhanced parent engagement require legislative change, policy development or specific programs? What mechanisms will assist?
13. What data needs to be collected? How can we move from a checklist orientation to a full 'engagement plan' with outcome tracking? How can we identify meaningful indicators of family, school and community engagement?
14. What types of parent engagement appear to correlate with student achievement? Does involvement/engagement at home, especially parents discussing school activities and helping children plan their programs, have the strongest impact? Or does engagement at the school site make the key difference?
15. What is the current level and status of parent engagement in Australian schools?
16. How might we "establish a vision for parent/ family engagement in the context of data-driven reform"?



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